

Tim Walz's son Gus has a nonverbal learning disorder: What is that?

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After his heartfelt reaction to his father's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention thrust him into the spotlight, 17-year-old Gus Walz has become one of the most high-profile people with

nonverbal learning disorder.

The condition doesn't mean Gus can't speak—he does. After hearing his dad, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, describe his family as "my entire world" Wednesday night, the tearful teenager rose to his feet, pointed toward the stage and said, "That's my dad!"

Gus is one of millions of Americans with nonverbal learning disorder. A 2020 [study](#) in *JAMA Network Open* estimated that 3% to 4% of children and adolescents in the U.S. may have the condition, and [another study](#) this year in *Scientific Reports* concluded that the prevalence in children may be as high as 8%.

The condition, known as NVLD, was first recognized in 1967 and doesn't yet have a formal clinical definition. It is characterized by a significant gap between verbal abilities—which are just fine—and nonverbal kinds of learning that involve visual-spatial processing, such as telling time on an analog clock, reading a map and balancing a budget.

Those challenges with spatial awareness can give children trouble with [motor skills](#). That can make them clumsy or cause problems with tasks like tying shoes, using silverware and writing by hand, according to the NVLD Project, a nonprofit that aims to have the condition added to the American Psychiatric Assn.'s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

In a way, having NVLD is like the opposite of having dyslexia, according to Scott Bezsylo, who works with neurodivergent students as executive director of Winston Preparatory School.

Reading is not a problem for kids with NVLD, who often have a large vocabulary. They're also able to recall facts and memorize things like multiplication tables.

School becomes more challenging toward the end of elementary school, when learning becomes more about noticing patterns and applying concepts. That can cause problems with reading comprehension and more advanced kinds of math problems.

NLVD also affects higher-order thinking, which is used to organize our thoughts and plan a project that requires multiple steps.

Tim Walz and his wife Gwen told People magazine that they noticed differences between Gus and his classmates from an early age, and that those differences "became increasingly clear" as he grew older. The couple, both teachers, didn't specify what those differences were.

Gus was recognized as having NVLD "when he was becoming a teenager," the Walzes said, adding that he also has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and an anxiety disorder.

It's not uncommon for people with NVLD to have an ADHD diagnosis as well, according to the Child Mind Institute. Both conditions can make a child seem disorganized or inattentive; in the case of NVLD, it's because they don't understand the assignment being discussed.

Some features of NVLD also overlap with those of autism spectrum disorder. People with NVLD may be socially awkward because they don't recognize the meaning behind facial expressions, body language and other nonverbal forms of communication. They may compensate by asking a lot of questions, which can come off as annoying.

Difficulty with visual-spacial processing can make it hard for those with NVLD to respect other people's personal space. Plus, their challenges with pattern recognition give them trouble relating past experiences to new situations.

Traits like these can make it hard to make friends, experts say. That tracks with the Walzes' experience.

"Gus preferred video games and spending more time by himself," his parents told People.

Comedian Chris Rock said that when he learned as an adult that he had NVLD, it explained a lot of things from his past.

Although he's great with words, "I kind of have a hard time with nonverbal cues with people. I always have," Rock said in a 2021 interview with Extra. "They say 70% of communication is nonverbal. So my relationships, even with my family or women I dated or whatever, there was always something a little off, and I couldn't put my finger on it."

The causes of NVLD are not clear. Although the deficits associated with the condition involve processes that occur in the right hemisphere of the brain, studies sponsored by the NVLD Project that compared brain scans of people with and without the disorder found differences in both hemispheres.

Regardless, the condition does not affect intelligence, and people can learn strategies to compensate for their shortcomings.

Successful interventions can include practice taking a problem and breaking it up into manageable pieces, or looking for patterns in complicated texts. As their skills improve, they develop a library of "scripts" that can help them in new situations, according to the Child Mind Institute. If they don't have a suitable script on hand, they'll have experience with creating a new one.

The same approach may help people with NVLD get better at navigating

social situations as well, experts say.

It seems the Walzes have taken this advice to heart.

"It took us time to figure out how to make sure we did everything we could to make sure Gus would be set up for success as he was growing up," they told People.

Being neurodivergent means Gus "is brilliant [and] hyper-aware of details that many of us pass by," the Walzes added. "What became so immediately clear to us was that Gus' condition is not a setback—it's his secret power."

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